

1-1-1980

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Recommended Citation

Eckey, Lorelei F. "Pilgrims of the Impossible." *The Palimpsest* 61 (1980), 26-33.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol61/iss1/5>

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Pilgrims of the Impossible

by Lorelei F. Eckey

*I*t was 1929, the last summer of prosperity the country was to enjoy for almost a decade. A hundred talented, excited young people had converged on Fairfield, Iowa for two days of meetings, instruction, and conferences at the headquarters of the Universal Producing Company. They were in the business of organizing amateur theatricals for civic and church groups throughout the United States and Canada. About 80 of the hundred were young women, the company's top "coaches" or play directors, who traveled on assignment across the nation. A banquet scheduled for that evening was to be the culmination of the events

at Fairfield.

But all had not gone well earlier in the day. The owners of the company—the four Stewart brothers—were exhausted by the seemingly endless round of meetings and conferences. Worse, a number of the civic groups that had hired the company's services suddenly backed out, canceling their shows, and to top things off, a delegation of coaches had beleaguered the bosses with a host of complaints. The bosses were not in a good mood. So it was no wonder that Wilson Stewart told Franceswayne Allen that she could not present a skit she had written especially for the evening's performance.

Fran was one of the company's veteran coaches, having answered a want ad she found

in the *Kansas City Star* back in 1928. Her skit was certainly harmless enough, and Fran was not among the "dissident" coaches. But in the unpleasant atmosphere of the previous two days, Wilson Stewart felt that anything might offend anyone. One faction would take the skit as a disrespectful dig at the management, while the other would see it as so much propaganda. It was safer all-round to cancel it. But because Wilson did not get word to his brother Raymond, who acted as master of ceremonies for the evening, Fran's skit was announced after speeches by the local postmistress and by Fairfield's mayor—both of whom praised the company's services to the community. Wilson had to let her go ahead.

Following a "dumb little step" (burlesquing the opening chorus routine all the coaches were only too familiar with), a crashing piano chord, and a little curtsy, Fran with a dozen of her colleagues "swung into 'Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam,' played with a nautical swing." Fran and the other coaches were tense.

So were their four bosses.

They must have recognized the old Sunday school tune. The Stewart brothers were the sons of a Methodist minister who had raised a large family in Fairfield. There was little money, and all of the children had had to work. Raymond ("R.R."), Wilson, Merle, and Weston ("Pete") had started their company with no capital other than uncommon business sense, ability, and imagination. Raymond, the oldest, had been yearbook editor, letterman, champion debater, and valedictorian at Fairfield High School. He worked his way through almost four years at Grinnell by selling candy and a candy cookbook he had written. Fran characterized Raymond as a "deep thinker with a razor-edged brain," a methodical young man with an uncanny knack for organization.

His younger brother Wilson also had been a lettered athlete as well as valedictorian in high school, but he had more "dynamite" than Raymond, Fran recalled. He was "the original

human dynamo, a composite jumping jack, diplomat, slave-driver, matinee idol, top sergeant." And although the four brothers were equal partners in the business, making few decisions about anything, official or personal, without consulting one another, the younger two, Merle and Weston, inherited their father's gentleness and patience and held Raymond and Wilson in "almost unbelievable awe."

They started the Universal Producing Company in Cedar Rapids around 1926, but they soon returned home to Fairfield, the small town that was to be their headquarters for more than 20 years. The company prospered through the worst years of the Depression, continuing to send out troops of young women, eventually expanding into the production of simulated radio amateur hours and motion picture exhibitions.



Three Universal coaches (courtesy of the author)



Fran and her chorus line of 12 swayed "like a bunch of Bali Bali girls" to the tune of "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam." "I took myself out to Fairfield," Fran sang to the assembly, "Way out in Iowaaaaay"

Spent all my papa's money
Learning how to coach a play;
For there are four Stewarts in Iowa
Out where the tall corn grows,
They are making a million bucks yearly
Because I stage their shows.

They are looking for Pilgrims
Of the Impossible it seems . . .

Two days of pent-up tension dissolved into laughter and applause. The audience, bosses and coaches, had been won over.

Perhaps they just needed reminding: they had all been trained to be what the Stewarts called "Pilgrims of the Impossible." Each of the young women had learned how to go into a strange town and, in the space of two weeks, put on a money-making show using anywhere from 100 to 500 and more very amateur actors, singers, dancers—whatever the community could supply. Universal's coaches not only directed the local performance but also organized the massive publicity and ticket-selling campaigns necessary for a profitable show. Then it was straight to another town to do the same thing all over again. At the height of the company's prosperity in the early '30s there were over 200 coaches on the road at any given time. Between 1927 and 1935 there were probably a

The Conference of Universal Coaches, August 1929 at the studios in Fairfield, Iowa (courtesy of the author)



Note on Sources

Interviews and correspondence with former coaches and others who remember the home talent shows yielded an abundance of source material for this article. For over three years the author has collaborated on a book with Mr. and Mrs. William Schoyer of Pittsburgh, Pa. The book's central character is Mrs. Schoyer's sister, Franceswayne Allen, who was working on her own reminiscence of her life in the home talent industry when she died in 1965. The Schoyer Collection includes Franceswayne's manuscript, diaries, letters, and other material. Also helpful were interviews and correspondence with Wretha Seaton Gann, Mrs. Richard Miller, Georgia Seabury Gould, Billie Cook Roth, Pauline Fossler Wilkinson, Ethel Jean Gardner Powell, Marie Bonally Jewett, Ila Claussen Rix, Merle Stewart, Mrs. Weston Stewart, Mr. and Mrs. Orville Prill, Ethel Garretson, Bill Munsey II, and members of the Fairfield High School Class of 1922 at their 55th reunion in 1977.

Universal Producing Company published several coaching, booking, and staging manuals, and these — along with newspaper clippings and bulletins — were available through the Stewart Collection. Other sources used include the *Fairfield Ledger*; the *Burlington Hawk-Eye*; William Corbin's "Everybody Wants to be an Actor," in *American Magazine*, November, 1934; "Corporal Eagan," a Universal script from the Museum of Americana Repertoire Theater, Midwest Old Threshers and Settlers Association, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa; and material from the Rogers Company, Fostoria, Ohio.

thousand Universal coaches, some who worked with the company only a short time and others who stayed for years. Many distinguished themselves later in a variety of fields. As Wilson Stewart once told a girl he was interviewing, "If you can do this, you can do anything," and he was probably right.

The "Pilgrims" faced problems that must have seemed impossible indeed, not the least of which was the Great Depression itself. The experience of one coach, Emily Stuart Neville, indicates that Universal's young women brought more than just theatrical skills to their work. The first thing a coach was supposed to do when she got into a town was to contact the president of the sponsoring organization in order to arrange an immediate committee

meeting. But when Emily telephoned Mrs. Smith, the president of the Ladies Aid Society, "someone answered the phone and said she was down at the church and I couldn't see her, goodbye." This didn't stop Emily, who called on her at the church.

"What in the world are you doing here?" Mrs. Smith demanded when Emily introduced herself. "We canceled the show way last week. It's impossible to have it."

Impossible? Emily's legs went weak. Later, in her report to the Stewarts, she wrote that she had felt her heart sinking right through her shoes.

But she was able to think fast. And talk fast. The Ladies Aid was having its weekly lunch, and Emily saw the ladies, the local preacher,

his wife, and a visiting preacher's wife eating and talking. Emily asked if there were any plates left, telling Mrs. Smith that she hadn't eaten lunch yet.

She ate and talked, praising the food, the people, the church, the town, and the hills. Then she brought the conversation back to the show. Why not put it on for charity?

"Will you tell me just how much your company gives for charity?" the visiting preacher's wife piped in. The firemen had put on a Universal show in her town and they hadn't seen fit to give her husband's church any of the proceeds. Besides, she thought the show was silly.

Emily wanted to murder the woman. She explained that the Stewarts were splendid Christian gentlemen who gave generously to all kinds of charities—a statement Emily supposed was true enough.

But the ladies weren't convinced. So when

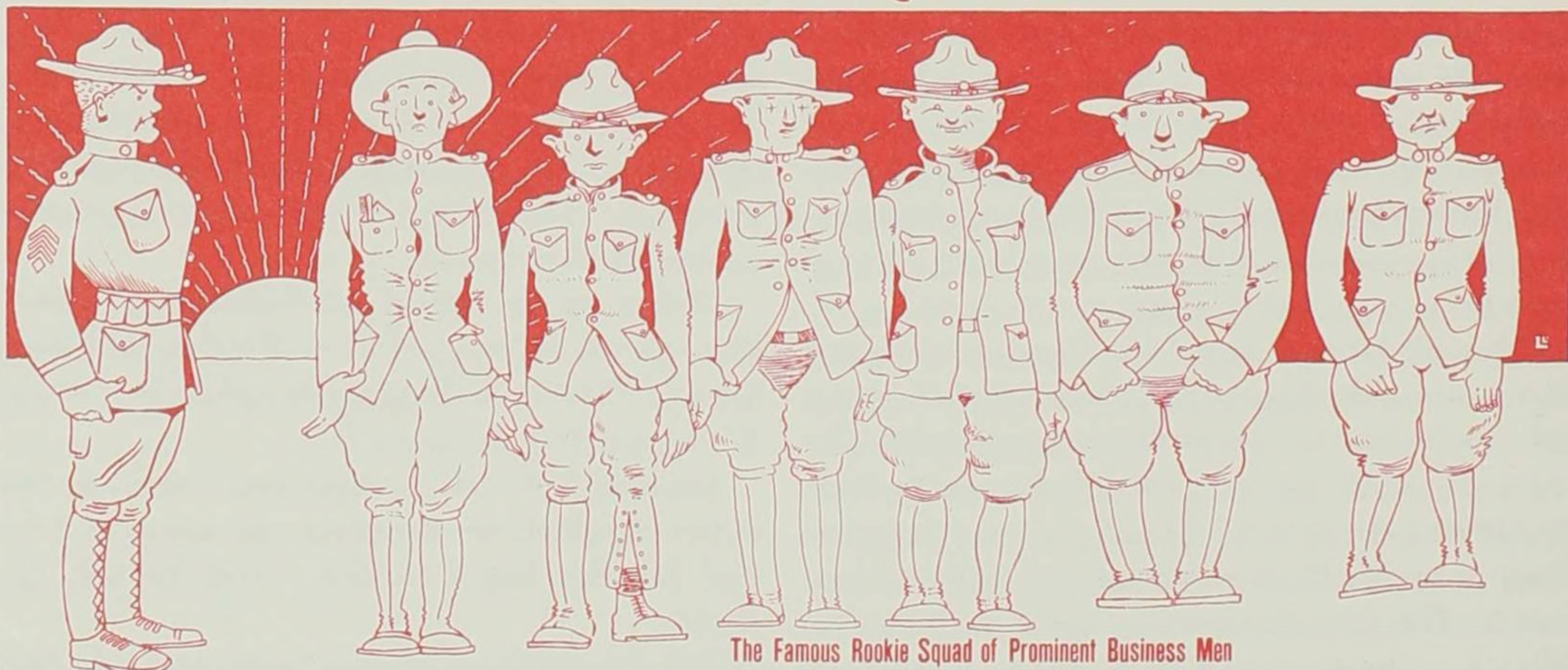
Emily finished her lunch, she walked with them into the kitchen to wash dishes. She washed, talked, cussed, and prayed with the ladies until five o'clock, by which time she had sold them on the show. And during the two weeks the show was in production, Mrs. Smith treated Emily like one of the family.

A sponsor's backing out was not the only problem a coach faced. The young women had to fight blizzards, blocked roads, and below-zero temperatures. Sometimes they courted arrest for pasting their advertising stickers on parked cars and slapping posters up against every available wall. Once when the police told Billie Cook that she had to remove the stickers she had placed on local autos, she capitalized on the penalty by announcing in the newspaper that all motorists who wanted their windshields scraped clean should show up at a certain gas station. There Billie's chorus girls, in full cos-

Consider Your Funny Bone

See **CORPORAL EAGEN**

150 Prominent Local People As Characters



Universal Producing Company relied on townspeople for actors as well as audience. (courtesy of the author)



Prominent businessmen as hillbillies in one of the Stewart brothers' plays (courtesy of the author)

tume, did the job and dispensed more publicity for the show. When on another occasion a coach from a competing production company told Universal's Isabel Jane Fry that putting up posters on lampposts was illegal and that she would be arrested, Isabel rebuffed him with the boast that "Universal coaches were the original 'Pilgrims of the Impossible,'" and up went the posters. When coaches were actually arrested, they knew how to talk their way out of jail. A few even managed to get local police chiefs to join their shows.

*T*he Universal Producing Company was by no means the first organization of its kind. Such companies had been around at least as early as 1903 when John Rogers started his operation at Fostoria, Ohio. But the Stewarts pioneered a number of important innovations, introducing to the industry an unusual attention to detail, original scripts by their own writers, authentic costumes from their own shops, and, of course, a highly professional staff of

coaches. The Stewarts planned every aspect of costuming, scenery, lighting, and office and warehouse procedure, and provided thick manuals of instruction to guide their coaches in the field. A "Daily Procedure," dozens of pages long, was to be memorized by all who worked for Universal.

Most of the company's coaches were college graduates and of impeccable moral character, which the Stewarts sought to maintain by imposing a stiff code of behavior. The young ladies were strictly cautioned against "playing around"—a term that covered everything from tippling and unauthorized vacations to dating during production. In fact, the "Daily Procedure" left little time for playing around of any kind.

Universal's whole training regimen was rigorous. When Fran answered that want ad in the *Kansas City Star* she found herself one among 30 applicants who had been accepted. After a half-dozen days of training, six had dropped by the wayside, and five more were asked to leave—probably because of their ob-

jectionable "late dating" habits. Of the 14 girls who weathered the three weeks of training, all but one were sent out on shows.

Georgia Langkop, Class of July 1930, remembers how Wilson taught them a sailor dance in a room above a bakery where the thermometer often hit 115. "Langkop," Wilson would shout, "learn to kick!" Georgia wrote later: "I've learned to kick and I've learned a lot of other things." She had been taught salesmanship and publicity, business management, dancing, singing, and makeup, as well as the current script, the whole of which had to be committed to memory. And all of this in the space of two or three weeks. They worked every day, night and day, except for Sunday morning. "Because," as Fran sang to the Fairfield banquet in 1929,

... it takes a fast walkin', talkin' gal
To put a show across in any town,
It takes a sticker-licken', flapper picking gal
They can't turn down.
Now, she's not tough, and she's not proud.
But she ropes in a great big crowd.
It takes a smart baby, I don't mean maybe,
To put a show across in any town. You heard me.
I said in any town.

The Universal Producing Company continued to stage plays through the late 1930s. Its owners put on a number of comedies with music and dancing and "flapper choruses" of prominent businessmen dressed up as vamps and movie stars. They did a biblical pageant. They designed shows and promotions using broadcasting techniques. They filmed and merchandised a passion film. And then suddenly in 1940 the Stewart brothers left the entertainment business. The sewing machines in the company's costume shop were retooled for the production of oilcloth liners for laundry baskets and Universal entered the closet accessory trade.

In the depths of the Great Depression, however, Universal had been synonymous with amateur theatricals. The Stewarts' company had flourished in hard times because its employees refused to admit the odds against success. Like coach Martha L. Haas, the thousand young women who directed Universal's plays had learned "that the word 'can't' doesn't mean a thing." They had become Pilgrims of the Impossible. □



CONTRIBUTORS

H. ROGER GRANT, a native of Albia, Iowa, did his undergraduate work at Simpson College, Indianola, and earned his graduate degrees at the University of Missouri-Columbia. His most recent book, *Insurance Reform: Consumer Action in the Progressive Era*, was published by the Iowa State University Press in September. Grant is Associate Professor of History at the University of Akron, Akron, Ohio.

LORELEI F. ECKEY has her Ph.D. in theater from the University of Iowa. She has taught theater, speech, and English composition in various Iowa colleges, and today lives with her husband on a farm in Mt. Union, Iowa. There he raises corn, soybeans, cattle, and goats, and she raises sheep and chickens.

ERRATA

An unfortunate editorial error resulted in a serious distortion of the facts concerning certain legal actions involving Charles C. Townsend in the article "The Orphan's Friend: Charles Collins Townsend and the Orphans' Home of Industry," published in the November-December 1979 issue of THE PALIMPSEST. The first full paragraph of page 194 confuses two court cases and reports incorrectly a verdict against Mr. Townsend. As author Marcelia C. Fisher notes,

The essential facts are presented accurately in the preceeding paragraph. The first is that "... in October of 1865 a suit was filed against Townsend by the father of one of the children, accusing him of 'enticing a child under 12 years of age.'" The second is that "... Johnson County district court records for May 19, 1866 show that the indictment against Townsend was

dismissed, the defendant discharged, and his bail exonerated." That court action ended the case.

There is no historical evidence to support the editorial assertion that "The father appealed the decision, getting the law suit reintroduced in 1868, and seeing it through to its final hearing on January 15, 1869. The judge found for the plaintiff, awarding the father \$851.80 with interest." The record shows that the amount of \$851.80 with interest were the damages awarded to George J. Boal on January 15, 1869 in a suit between George J. Boal and the Orphans' Home of Industry—not Townsend per se. George J. Boal, a respected Iowa City attorney of the firm of Fairall & Boal, and also in real estate, may have been one of the many creditors of the Orphans' Home of Industry but certainly was not the father of the child whom Townsend was earlier accused of enticing.

The staff of THE PALIMPSEST regrets its error and apologizes to Ms. Fisher and to readers of her article. — Ed.